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ABSTRACT

The nature of the nontraditional accreditation experience and its value as a process for strategic and long-range planning are discussed. The role of the institutional research office in the process is also examined. Perceptions of directors of self-studies for nontraditional accreditation at 16 colleges in the southeast were surveyed. Using a structured interview, the survey focused on six major areas: institutional characteristics, institutional planning, nature and focus of the self-study, study leadership, visiting team, and outcomes. Findings of the survey suggest that the nontraditional process is perceived to be more meaningful and useful to institutions in addressing specific problems or issues, clarifying mission and goals, and promoting ongoing planning activities. Four of the participating institutions utilized the nontraditional self-study effort as a means for implementing a formal planning process that could be carried into the future. The nontraditional effort tends to be at least as comprehensive and perhaps more complex than the more straightforward quantitative process employed in a traditional study. Perhaps the single most important factor to consider prior to selecting the nontraditional self-assessment approach is the difficulty an institution might experience in selecting an appropriate focus for the study. (SW)

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NON-TRADITIONAL ACCREDITATION:
A SUMMARY OF THE NEW EXPERIENCE

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This paper was presented at the Twenty-Fourth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Hyatt-Regency in Fort Worth, Texas, May 6-9, 1984. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

Daniel R. Coleman, Chairman
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INTRODUCTION

For almost three decades accrediting agencies have required institutions as a part of the accrediting process to carry out extensive evaluations or "self-studies." Typically, these studies have been burdensome and mechanical and have resulted largely in the development of information which is unrelated to either the real problems or major opportunities of the institutions under review. As a result, the self-study is often viewed as a mundane process and the potential benefits of such an effort generally go unrealized. In recent years regional accrediting agencies and, in particular the Southern Associate of Colleges and Schools, have recognized the limitations of the traditional process in addressing the unique needs and problems facing modern institutions.

In addition, many educational institutions have become quite sophisticated in the development of their own planning and evaluation processes. Recognizing these developments, regional accrediting agencies have utilized "non-traditional" self-studies to provide the much needed relevance in the self-study process and to allow institutions to focus on those issues or problems unique to their specific situations. These non-traditional studies give the institutions the opportunity to develop their own conceptual framework for their studies and an opportunity to identify special emphases and directions to be pursued. The non-traditional approach allows institutions to develop a process which can become an important element in their overall strategic planning effort.

This paper explores the nature of the non-traditional accreditation experience and assesses its value as a process for strategic and long-range planning. The role of the institutional research office in the process is also discussed.

Important Observations From the Literature

The purposes of a self-study have been outlined by Kells (1980). He suggests that the process is intended to help educational institutions and programs improve and should result in useful institutional research and self-analysis. Most importantly, he suggests that the self-study process should provide a firm foundation for all planning efforts. Therefore, strategic, short-range, and long-range plans should be based on the findings of the self-study and an identification of institutional strengths and weaknesses.

Consistent with the self-study objectives outlined by Kells, there has been recent emphasis on strategic planning and environmental scanning. This planning thrust stresses the importance of organizations identifying how they can respond to the needs of society. Katz and Kahn (1978) note that organizations do not exist in a static world and because the environment is constantly changing, a rigid or closed organization, even if protected by excellent support systems, may not survive.

The importance of environmental testing and adaptive planning systems is highlighted in the contemporary literature describing successful American organizations and comparing these organizations with outstanding Japanese companies (Peters and Waterman, 1983 and Pascale and Athos, 1981). These authors clearly identify the need for flexible and adaptive planning and evaluation processes to address problems and issues facing today's organizations. In higher education, the non-traditional approach to accreditation should provide institutions with a tool for taking stock of their strengths and weaknesses and for adapting to a changing environment.

Self-studies have traditionally provided institutions of higher education with an opportunity to assess their progress utilizing comprehensive standards and quantitative criteria. In the early years of accreditation and perhaps now for new and developing institutions a standard approach to self-assessment is adequate. Gordon Sweet, Executive Director of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (Note 1) has noted that the original standards developed for use in the self-assessment process and their associated empirical criteria were perhaps appropriate for higher education in the early sixties. However, he suggests that it is now time for institutions to move from a simple empirical effort to a more qualitative self-assessment approach.

To respond to this need, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools has permitted selected institutions to carry out a non-traditional reaffirmation process. This non-traditional process allows an institution, in conjunction with the accrediting association, to explore particular issues or problem areas which could not be adequately addressed under the traditional self-assessment process. This is not to suggest that the standards and criteria should be ignored but rather that those institutions which clearly meet the standards should have an opportunity to pursue broader and perhaps more internally useful evaluations.

Hodgkinson (1983) has noted that institutions of higher education must be sensitive to and plan for the societal changes which are occuring in the United

States today if they are to maintain their viability in the long term. These changes include major shifts in population demographics which will affect enrollments, the ability of the population and tax base to provide adequate financial support for higher education, and program changes necessary to prepare our population for working in an information society. These impending changes clearly suggest that institutions of higher education will have to identify their role and niche in the educational system and, as noted in the popular literature, engage in substantial adaptive planning to assure their viability in the future.

This adaptive thrust is reflected in the numerous presentations and articles by educational writers on strategic planning in just the last year. As suggested by Sweet (Note 1), it is indeed time for higher education to move on to the next level of planning and development in its approach to self-study processes. This need is addressed by the non-traditional process which allows institutions to define their own criteria and standards as they attempt to identify their appropriate niche in the higher education environment. These more flexible, non-traditional approaches contain key elements of the strategic planning process unavailable through the traditional approach to accreditation. Non-traditional studies can focus on major problems, institutional strengths and weaknesses, and the institution's ability to respond to important societal needs. This departure from the rigid quantitative evaluation of institutional characteristics suggests a major step toward more holistic institutional planning and evaluation.

The non-traditional accreditation process has been employed since the mid-1970s and has provided institutions with the opportunity to utilize the accreditation process as a mechanism for addressing significant issues and concerns. Because a sufficient number of institutions have experienced the non-traditional approach, it is possible to collect information in a systematic fashion to describe the nature of this experience and assess its value as a process for strategic and long-range planning. This study is designed to identify the key elements of the non-traditional approach based on the perceptions of self-study directors who led these unique processes in the southeastern region of the United States.

Methodology

Non-traditional self-study directors in the southeastern region were interviewed using a structured interview format to collect information regarding their non-traditional experience. Participants received the interview questionnaire in advance to assist them in preparing for the interview and to allow time for reflection on the process at their institution which may have been completed for some time. The interview focused on six major areas (1) institutional characteristics, (2) institutional planning, (3) nature and focus of the self-study, (4) study leadership, (5) visiting team, and (6) outcomes. Extensive telephone interviews were conducted to elicit responses to the individual questions and to ensure reliability and clarity of both the questions and responses.

Sample

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools assisted with the study by identifying those 20 institutions within the southern region which had participated in a non-traditional accreditation process since this option was made available in 1973. Because the study focused on perceptions provided by the self-study directors, it was not possible to include four of the institutions whose directors were not available for comment. Thus, the population for this study was reduced to a total of 16 institutions, ten public and six private. Of the 16 participating institutions, all but two offered both graduate and undergraduate programs. Fall 1983 enrollment at the participating institutions ranged from 694 to 29,000 with seven, or 44%, having Fall FTES enrollments of between 5,000 and 10,000. Only two of the participating institutions could be described on the basis of enrollment as exceptionally large with FTES enrollment exceeding 20,000.

From a financial and faculty perspective, the participating institutions had annual operating budgets ranging from $10 million to $402 million. Nine (56%) of the participating institutions had budgets of $100 million or less, while seven (44%) had operating budgets of $100 million or more. Five institutions had operating budgets which exceeded $200 million on a annual basis. FTE faculty support at the participating institutions ranged from 65 to 3,006. Five institutions had an FTE faculty support level which was in excess of 1,000.

In describing their institutions, two institutions classified themselves as liberal arts, seven as regional, four as urban, and three as national. Six institutions completed their non-traditional efforts prior to 1980, with the first being completed in 1975. Since 1980, ten studies have been completed, with three having been finished within the last two years.

The population participating in this study represents a broad range of institutions, ranging from small liberal arts to national research institutions, from both the public and private sectors. The authors believed they had identified all of those institutions which participated in a non-traditional self-study process in the southern region. However, as a result of the investigation, it was discovered that other institutions may have undergone a non-traditional process and thus may have been inadvertently omitted from the study. These additional institutions were not identified by the Southern Association as having completed a non-traditional process and might be considered for future research.

Findings

The major findings of this study can best be summarized by the major areas of investigation: institutional planning, nature and focus of the study, study leadership, visiting team, and study outcomes.

Institutional Planning

A major thrust of the study was to determine to what degree institutions which utilized the non-traditional self-study process now have ongoing institutional planning processes. The relationship between the non-traditional self-study and institutional planning was also investigated. With regard to the concept of an ongoing planning process, 13 of the institutions reported that they had substantial ongoing planning efforts which were clearly identifiable, while only three indicated that they had no such process or that planning tended to be carried out in an ad hoc fashion. As might be expected, all institutions reported an annual budget process, although some expressed concern about the substantial changes in that process which were implemented from year-to-year. A capital planning process was reported at 14 of the 16 institutions with one indicating that such a process did not exist and another expressing uncertainty regarding the existance of a formal effort. In the area of curriculum planning the findings were quite surprising. Twelve of the institutions reported having an ongoing formal traditional curriculum process, while four expressed that no such process existed in their institutions. Reflecting the substantial level of planning which is carried out at these institutions, 12 indicated that planning was not only going on at the university or collegewide level but also at the level of individual schools, divisions, and departments within their institutions. Four institutions indicated that such formalized planning was not occuring at the lower levels in their institutions.

As might be expected in higher education there was a variety of approaches to institutional planning. Almost 50% of the institutions indicated that they utilized both a centralized and decentralized approach to planning, providing the opportunity for individual units, departments, and schools to have meaningful input into the overall planning process. Six institutions, however, indicated that their planning activities occured using a centralized model with the predominant amount of planning activity generated by the top levels of the administration. For those three institutions which reported no ongoing formal planning process, they suggested that if there was any planning it was clearly decentralized.

A primary concern of this study was the analysis of the relationship between ongoing planning processes and the non-traditional study effort. Of the 16 institutions which were investigated, six indicated no relationship between the non-traditional study effort and their ongoing planning processes. Ten, however, indicated that there was a very close relationship between the non-traditional study effort and their overall objectives with regard to institutional planning. Four, or 25% of the institutions participating in the study, indicated that the non-traditional approach was selected for the specific purpose of implementing a planning process on their campus or to produce a long-term strategic plan.

Nature of the Study

To assist in understanding the nature of the non-traditional study at the 16 participating institutions, the respondents were asked to identify the major focus of their study, indicate whether or not the traditional accreditation standards were employed, and provide some indication of the general involvement

of faculty and the overall university community in the non-traditional study process.

From analyzing institutional responses with regard to the focus or theme of their study, it was clear that the types of non-traditional studies which have been carried out could best be described in three categories (1) planning, (2) mission, and (3) special emphases or focus. Of the 16 institutions, six, or 37%, conducted planning-oriented studies with four of those institutions utilizing the non-traditional process as an opportunity to implement an ongoing and formal process on their campuses. Three of the institutions, or 19%, focused on clarifying and exploring their missions for the future with the hope of clarifying mission statements and goals and to identify institutional hopes and aspirations. Finally, 7, or 44% of the institutions, took advantage of the unique nature of the non-traditional study to address particular issues of concern on their campuses. The issues which they focused on included: an administrative review of organizational issues, identifying how to meet an urban thrust, focusing on the service role of the university, program development, identifying special strategies to improve student outcomes on standardized measures, identifying institutional areas of excellence, and how to merge two colleges within a single institution. Clearly, the majority of the institutions took advantage of the opportunity for special emphasis provided by the non-traditional approach.

In describing institutional involvement in the effort, it is interesting to note that eight institutions reported over 50% of their faculty were involved in the study process, with four institutions indicating a very limited role by the faculty, and four suggesting that the faculty played a moderate role in the effort. It is also important to note that of the 16 institutions, five indicated faculty involvement of 90% or more in the study. While some of the institutions indicated limited faculty involvement, all of the respondents indicated that multiple constituencies (faculty, staff, students, and trustees) were provided an opportunity to participate in the process in some way.

Of major concern to many institutions was the potential of the traditional criteria being used in the non-traditional self-assessment process. However, eight, or 50% of the institutions, reported that the traditional standards were used to provide a context or point of reference in developing or carrying out their non-traditional study. The remaining 50% indicated the traditional accreditation standards and criteria were not used at all in the evaluation process.

Study Leadership

In understanding the impact or nature of the non-traditional study at these institutions, it was helpful to examine and develop a feel for the conceptual framework of the study, who conceptualized the effort, and how the study was managed and supported. Other questions were related to the function and role of the Office of Institutional Research in the effort and the involvement of other constituencies, such as consultants, the external community and Trustees.

The idea of pursuing a non-traditional study was conceived by a variety of individuals within the 16 institutions. Eight institutions indicated that their

President, in consultation with SACS and internal constituencies, elected to pursue this new approach. Six institutions indicated that the primary impetus for pursuing the non-traditional approach came from the Office of Academic Affairs, while only two institutions reported that the idea for the non-traditional effort came from administrative offices which had the functional responsibility for planning activities on their campuses. It is interesting to note that of the 16 institutions which participated in the non-traditional effort, only six presidents maintained direct involvement in the self-study process, while the other presidents participated in an official capacity only. Regardless of where the impetus for the study occurred, the major reasons for pursuing this unique approach seemed to be the opportunity for a special focus, an opportunity to carry out comprehensive planning, and finally, a desire for a more meaningful and individual evaluation process.

The conceptual framework for the individual studies at these institutions was developed in three major ways. Two institutions relied on the literature and existing planning models for conceptualizing their approach to the non-traditional study. The conceptual framework for the studies at nine institutions was developed by administrative offices or individuals responsible for the study effort, while five institutions utilized committees or task forces to develop the study process and model.

The ongoing management of the study is of considerable importance in understanding how the non-traditional effort has been accomplished. The traditional approach of establishing a steering committee to oversee the study effort was utilized by nine of the responding institutions. A planning committee or commission was used by three institutions to provide overall management for the study effort. The four remaining institutions utilized unique approaches to managing the effort. Two relied on the normal organizational framework to carry out the study and two used small elite faculty committees to provide the needed oversight for the effort. A most interesting finding is related to how the project was managed on a day-to-day basis. Of the 16 institutions, seven provided day-to-day leadership through study directors from the faculty, while nine institutions relied on administrators to provide the necessary day-to-day leadership.

Because credibility of the study effort as well as the effectiveness of the leadership is related to the involvement of key individuals in the process, it is useful to explore the degree to which institutions involved other constituencies in their effort. Of the 16 institutions, seven institutions directly involved their Board of Visitors or Trustees in the non-traditional effort. Six included people from the external community to assist them in the study process. The largest number of institutions, however, nine or 56%, utilized outside consultants to help them either develop or carry out the objectives of their study effort.

Visiting Team

An important element of any accreditation or reaffirmation process is the role and nature of the visiting team. This is especially important in the non-

traditional process since it is carried out differently from the traditional process which makes use of rather clear quantitative criteria. To develop an understanding of the nature and role of the visiting team in the non-traditional process, respondents were asked to comment on the nature of their visiting team, its size, the role of the chair, whether or not individuals on the team had prior experience with non-traditional studies, and whether or not they felt that the traditional criteria were utilized in the evaluation process.

Of the 16 participating institutions, 13 felt that the composition of the visiting team reflected the nature and focus of their particular study. Only two indicated that this was not the case and one institution was uncertain whether their study focus was actually considered in the selection process. The visiting teams ranged in size from 6 to 22. Of the 16 institutions, nine had a visiting team with membership between 10 and 15, while six had a visiting team larger than 16.

Because of the importance of the visiting team in the non-traditional process, 11 institutions had an opportunity to review a list of candidates for membership on their visitation team and/or to suggest names for consideration as team members. Only five institutions reported having no input into the selection process. None of the institutions indicated that team members visited the campus prior to the accreditation visit, except the team chair. It is a standard operating procedure of the Southern Association for the team chair to visit the campus in advance. With regard to the role of the chairman in the non-traditional process, 14 institutions indicated that the chair did not play any special role in the design and development of their studies, while two institutions indicated that the chair was instrumental in their study effort. Eight institutions, however, did indicate the chair played an important role in maintaining the non-traditional focus of the study.

A critical concern of most institutions participating in the non-traditional effort was whether or not visiting team members had prior experience with the non-traditional process. Ten of the responding institutions indicated they had a minimum of one member on the team who had prior experience in the non-traditional setting. Two institutions, however, felt that none of their team members had prior experience with the non-traditional approach while four institutions were uncertain.

It was the perception of nine institutions that the traditional standards were utilized to some degree by the visiting team in the evaluation process. Four institutions clearly indicated that the traditional criteria were not employed, while three were uncertain whether or not the visiting team considered the criteria in their evaluation effort.

Outcomes

The last portion of the interview focused directly on the outcomes of the non-traditional self-study. In this area of inquiry institutions were asked to identify important and unique outcomes of the non-traditional approach for their institution. The institutions were also asked to assess the level of team

building or unity on the campus regarding the outcomes of the study as well as their views regarding the value of the non-traditional approach and whether or not they are continuing to utilize the results of the study on their campuses. Information was also collected regarding the nature and length of the final report and the visiting teams' assessment of the study. Finally, the institutions provided input on whether or not the non-tradtional approach might be selected again on their campuses.

The outcomes of the individual studies, as might be expected, paralleled the original focus of their efforts and fall into three major types: mission, planning, and special emphases. The major outcomes are described below by type.

Mission

The three institutions whose studies focused on mission reported that they made significant progress in clarifying and understanding their institutional missions and also gained a better understanding of institutional resource planning and management. One institution looked at a number of areas which had previously escaped careful examination. A redefinition of special areas of emphasis and themes at another institution occured as a result of the careful evaluation process which was conducted. This redefintion was cast in the context of resource planning criteria to provide a realistic framework for planning future aspirations. An identification of institutional aspirations as well as the implementation of a new management decision and review system with special emphasis on non-academic units was the major outcome of a third institution's non-traditional effort. These findings suggest that institutions whose studies focused on mission took this opportunity to combine the clarification of mission and institutional aspirations with a careful examination of resource planning and management parameters.

Planning

The six institutions who focused their studies on institutional planning realized substantial outcomes. Four of these institutions utilized the non-traditional process as an opportunity to implement major planning activities which are currently ongoing. The remaining two institutions utilized the non-traditional planning effort as an opportunity to develop a broader understanding of external trends and their implications for long-range planning. Those institutions whose studies focused on planning all felt that the planning focus provided a unique opportunity to involve the broader university community in the process of understanding major institutional problems and opportunities. The broader community was also exposed to demographic and societal factors or trends which could affect their institution.

These institutions identified as a major outcome the establishment of plans and clarification of goal statements. A number of institutions identified the production of a formal planning document as a major step forward for the institution in coming to grips with its aspirations, goals,

and objectives. One institution responded, "If it had not been for the non-traditional process, a formal planning document would never have been generated and the impetus for ongoing planning activities may have been lost." All of those institutions who focused on planning appear to have achieved or exceeded their original objectives for the study.

Special Emphases

There were seven institutions which had a special focus in their non-traditional study effort. As would be expected, there was great variance in the problems addressed. All of the institutions, however, reported significant and important outcomes related to their specific focus. None of the institutions failed to achieve their most important objectives.

The major outcomes for the institutions with special emphases include the following: major changes in the structure of the institution; clarification of university governance leading to reassignment of administrative duties, greater awareness of the institution's service role and clarification of the role of faculty in the service area; reorganization to facilitate institutional program development, development of long-term strategic plans to address major service-oriented problems and to move the campus forward with an understanding of the significant service problems of the institution, an identification of areas of excellence and the establishment of priorities among these areas, and finally, the assessment of the effectiveness of merging two schools within an institution. The outcomes reported by these institutions clearly suggest that the non-traditional approach goes beyond a simplistic, quantitative analysis of the institution's ability to meet established criteria and can result in major change within a college or university as it responds to identified program and policy issues.

Fourteen of the institutions felt that the non-traditional process provided an opportunity for building a common understanding of the institution's major mission, goals, and objectives. A number of these institutions suggested that the opportunity for educating the university community and communicating with them on topics important to the institution's future was a critical element of the non-traditional process. Only one institution indicated that the non-traditional approach did not seem to promote a better and broader understanding of institutional mission, goals, and objectives. One institution was uncertain regarding the benefits of the process with regard to promoting a common goal or objective on the campus.

In discussing the nature and length of the final report it was clear that there is commonality between the non-traditional and traditional self-assessment process. While one institution produced a single final report of about 50 pages, the vast majority of institutions produced multi-volume reports ranging in length from 50 to 3500 pages. Clearly, the non-traditional study can be as extensive from a final report point of view as the traditional approach which typically produces volumes of quantitative information on each of the standards.

In assessing the value and importance of the non-traditional approach, 15 of the 16 institutions believed that the non-traditional effort was a valuable strategy for their institution. A number of these institutions indicated that they covered the same bases in the non-traditional effort as they would have covered in a traditional approach, while others indicated that the study was of value but not necessarily superior to the traditional methodology. Only one institution expressed reservations about the value of the study even though substantial outcomes from the non-traditional approach on their campus were identified. Twelve of the 16 institutions continue to use the results and outcomes from their studies, while three have made only limited use of the results. Seventy-five percent (12) of the institutions felt that the traditional approach to accreditation would not be as useful or meaningful. Four indicated that the traditional process would be at least as satisfactory, with two institutions indicating that neither process was of much value to them in carrying out their mission and accountabilities. Given the opportunity to choose between the traditional or non-traditional approach for future studies, 11 institutions indicated they would select the non-traditional approach, while two indicated that they would not. Three institutions were uncertain about which approach they might pursue in the future.

The final outcome element explored was the visiting teams' assessment of the final product. All but one institution indicated that the visiting team had an overall positive view of the comprehensiveness and completness of their effort. In general, it was the institutions' perception that the visiting teams were pleased by the nature, focus, and quality of the studies on the individual campuses.

Discussion

This study explored the nature of the non-traditional accreditation process in an effort to gain insight into this new experience and identify its usefulness in promoting institutional processes such as strategic and long-range planning. Another objective was to identify the role of the office of institutional research in the design, development, and execution of the non-traditional self-study.

The findings of the study suggest that the non-traditional process is perceived to be more meaningful and useful to institutions in addressing specific problems or issues, clarifying mission and goals, and in promoting ongoing planning activities. The flexibility of the process provides institutions with a special opportunity to tailor the self-study to their specific needs and concerns. This is in contrast to the more traditional process which typically is highly structured and yields quantitative information which does not necessarily address institutional problems and concerns in a holistic fashion. Virtually all of the institutions participating in this study perceived the non-traditional process as an important catalyst in promoting discussions and planning regarding significant campus issues.

At many of the institutions the non-traditional self-assessment process was closely related to the institution's goal of implementing or utilizing existing

long-range and strategic planning processes. As noted in the findings, four of the participating institutions utilized the non-traditional self-study effort as a means for implementing a formal planning process which could be carried into the future. Six institutions, however, carried out the non-traditional self-assessment within the context of existing planning processes. In fact, a number of institutions reported that a similar process would have occured even in the absence of the need for an accreditation self-study. Before assuming that a major characteristic of the non-traditional effort is its focus on planning, it should be understood that an institution's predisposition toward planning might influence their decision to utilize this self-study approach. However, the non-traditional approach clearly is a mechanism which can respond to the need for institutions to plan for the future.

The planning orientation of an institution is in fact one of the reasons why the non-traditional self-study approach may have been selected. As suggested by Sweet (Note 1), the need for a more comprehensive and qualitative evaluation process has also motivated institutions to pursue an approach which can yield more meaningful results. An inherent concern of the nontraditional effort is the possibility that an institution might select this approach simply as a mechanism for avoiding the substantial effort required by the traditional approach. The results of this study clearly suggest that the non-traditional effort tends to be at least as comprehensive and perhaps more complex than the more straight forward quantitative process employed in a traditional study.

Clearly, the selection of a non-traditional approach does not diminish the information requirements which are typically a part of the traditional self-study but rather provides the institution with the opportunity to put such information together in a manner which focuses on major institutional priorities, goals, and issues. The opportunity to restructure this information into a context which can have relevance for the long-term future of the institution or to address special issues substantially increases the potential for an effective self-study outcome.

The special opportunities provided by the non-traditional approach can enhance the ability of the institution to focus on processes which can result in institutional change. In fact, the non-traditional study approach can be a major change agent by providing broad based understanding and communication with multiple constituencies regarding institutional goals, aspirations, limitations, and opportunities.

There are a number of important factors which should be considered prior to selecting the non-traditional self-assessment approach. Perhaps the single most important factor is the difficulty an institution might experience in selecting an appropriate focus for the study. In cases where an institution elects to pursue mission clarification or carry out broad based planning, the conceptual framework of the study is much easier to develop. However, for those institutions which choose to focus on special problems or issues, the identification of appropriate issues and concerns and their integration into a broader study is somewhat more difficult to accomplish and could result in the study producing less than desirable outcomes. The use of the non-traditional standards or cri-

teria is another major factor to be considered. Typically, institutions are not permitted to pursue the non-traditional approach until they have achieved a profile which is consistent with the general accreditation standards and criteria. Although the standards and criteria can be most useful, as suggestd by Kells (1983), in formulating a non-traditional effort they can also place undesirable limitations on an institution's ability to vary from them in their study effort.

A related concern is the degree to which the visiting team utilizes the traditional standards in their evaluation of the institution's self-study effort. While many institutions have had a visiting team chair with prior experience in the non-traditional approach, the vast majority of team members to date have not had the opportunity to participate in these pioneering efforts. Therefore, institutions using the non-traditional approach should be prepared for a situation in which team members wish to refer to the standards and criteria in their evaluation effort. The last and perhaps most important limitation of the non-traditional effort is the potential for institutions to abuse the process by avoiding serious evaluation of their services and programs. While the findings of this study did not suggest this was a problem, as all institutions were able to identify significant outcomes of their effort, an institution considering the non-traditional approach should understand its motive for selecting the process and avoid the possibility of creating a bad experience.

It was indeed a surprise to learn of the insignificant role played by the office of institutional research in most of these non-traditional accreditation processes. With the exception of one institution, the directors of institutional research and their staffs were not involved in the conceptualization or design of the overall self-assessment effort. In almost all cases, the role of the office of institutional research was simply one of support in which the office was asked to provide specific data and information. This raises a major concern for the institutional research function, given the fact that in most institutions the office of institutional research is a repository for considerable amounts of data. In addition, these offices typically have considerable expertise in the analysis and integration of complex information regarding the institution and the environment in which it exists. This observation raises a serious question regarding the function and centrality of institutional research in the ongoing planning and operation of our major colleges and universities. In considering the centrality of the institutional research function in higher education administration, it is helpful to note that 25% of the institutions participating in this study indicated there was no formal institutional resarch function on their campuses.

Clearly, the non-traditional self-assessment approach provides institutions with considerable opportunity for increasing the meaningfulness of the self-study effort. It is also a viable mechanism for implementing a strategic or long-range planning effort or for taking advantage of an already existing planning process.

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